December 14, 2009

Questions and Answers about the Calico Mountains Complex Wild Horse Gather

Why is the BLM gathering the Calico herds?
The proposed gather is needed to achieve and maintain the appropriate management level (AML) of wild horses in the Calico Mountains Complex and prevent further deterioration resulting from the current overpopulation within the five herd management areas (HMAs) of the complex in northwestern Nevada. The current wild horse population of 3,040 is about 5.5 times the low range AML of 572 horses and about three times the land's full carrying capacity or high range AML of 952 horses. (Low range of AML is the minimum herd population level; high range AML is the maximum population level that can be sustained by the land in conjunction with other land uses.)

EA/Decision Record Questions

What is the Proposed Action and other alternatives considered in the Final Environmental Assessment (EA)?
The Proposed Action is the removal of excess wild horses, the application of fertility control and the adjustment of sex ratios so that there is a 60 percent male to female sex ratio left in the herds. Alternative 2 called for the removal of excess horses only. No wild burros will be removed in either alternative. Alternative 3 was No Action – that is, to defer the gathering and removal of wild horses. The BLM also considered several other alternatives but didn't fully analyze them because they didn't meet the purpose and need of the EA or were unfeasible.

Alternatives Considered but Dismissed from Detailed Analysis

Use of Bait and/or water Trapping: The Complex encompasses more than 542,000 acres and is too large to use this method because the area has numerous, widely scattered small water sources on public and private lands, which would be hard to restrict horse access to in order to use water traps.

Gather every two Years, remove excess wild horses to AML, and apply 2-year PZP: The primary goal is to first reach AML within the Complex to reduce further deterioration of the rangelands associated with the current overpopulation of wild horses and burros, and attain a thriving natural ecological balance of the rangelands. It would take multiple gathers before the highest percentage of mares within the population could be treated with fertility control to reduce the population growth rates. Cost for conducting bi-annual gathers and implementing fertility control would be considerable, would take years to see an actual reduction of animals, subject the animals to considerable stress and potentially jeopardize the overall health and safety of the animals.

Remove or reduce livestock within the HMAs: Livestock use has already been adjusted and decreased. There are four allotments within the Complex, and the permittees have voluntarily implemented non-use due to the lack of forage and water resulting from the current drought conditions and overpopulation of wild horses. The current wild horse population is equivalent to 36,000 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) of forage, which is greater than the 32,000 AUMs of forage it has been determined the

range can sustainably provide for both wild horses and livestock combined. Thus the current wild horse population alone is exceeding the carrying capacity of the public lands in the Calico Complex.

Gather the Complex to the upper range of AML: This alternative does not comply with the Act because management within AML would not be achieved, and it would not allow for removal of sufficient excess animals to achieve/maintain a thriving natural ecological balance. The Complex would immediately exceed the established AML with the 2010 spring foal crop of approximately 200-250 foals (based on 1,000 animals present at high AML), extending the overpopulation that would result in ongoing impacts to the rangelands and prevent the BLM from managing wild horses at a level that achieves a thriving natural ecological balance within the Complex.

Control the excess wild horses with only the use of fertility control treatment: This alternative does not comply with statutory mandates because AML is not achieved, and excess animals are not removed to achieve/maintain a thriving natural ecological balance. BLM analyzed a 2-year and 3-year fertility control option. This approach would be very expensive to implement due to the large volume of animals, would not address the current over-population of horses beyond what the range can sustain, and horse population would continue even with fertility treatment that reduces the growth rate to 4-7% per annum (rather than the current 20-27% growth per annum), resulting in an overpopulation of more than 3,000 animals with the 2010 spring foaling season. The continued overpopulation of wild horses would further impact and degrade rangeland forage and water resources, and with extended drought conditions, could potentially result in an emergency situation that threatens the health and well-being of the wild horses in the Calico Complex.

Gather portion of existing population, make an incremental reduction (500 horses) of the excess wild horses and implement fertility control treatments while evaluating habitat response: This alternative does not comply with statutory mandates because AML is not achieved, and excess animals are not removed to achieve/maintain a thriving natural ecological balance. The 2010 spring foal crop would result in an additional 500-600 horses, and therefore there would be no net decrease in the total number of wild horses currently on the range. This would result in continuing resource damage, impacts to permitted livestock, wildlife, listed/sensitive species and their habitats, and adjacent tribal lands.

Make on-the-ground and individualized excess wild horse determination prior to removal: This alternative was suggested in response to BLM's proposed action and was determined to be infeasible due to the size of the Complex and large number of excess wild horses. The horses are a herd animal and travel as a group, making it virtually impossible to single out an individual animal among the herd for such determination and individualized removal. The entire herd would have to be gathered, physically handled to determine what animals would qualify for selective removal, as suggested through public comment.

Other gather alternatives to helicopter use: In response to public comments, BLM considered alternative gather methods such as chemical immobilization, net gunning, and wrangler on horseback to drive trap. Net gunning would still require use of helicopters and was eliminated due to its expense and the additional time required. Chemical immobilization is a very specialized technique and strictly regulated. The BLM does not have the expertise, and it would be extremely ineffective due to the size of the Complex, access limitations, and approachability of the horses. Use of wrangler on horseback can be effective on a small scale, but due to the number of excess horses to remove, the size of the Complex, access limitation and approachability of the horses, as well as the high risk of potential injury

to the wranglers, domestic horses and the wild horses, the use of helicopter remains the safest and most effective method to conduct large scale gathers.

What was the final decision record?
Based on the Calico Mountains Complex Wild Horse Gather EA # DOI-BLM-NV-W030-2010-0001-EA and the Finding of No Significant Impact, BLM decided to implement the Proposed Action, which is to remove excess wild horses, implement fertility control on released mares and adjust the male sex ratio to 60 percent.

Gather Process Questions

Where would the BLM gather horses?
The BLM would gather approximately 2,500 excess wild horses from the Calico Mountains Complex (Complex) in northwestern Nevada which includes the following Herd Management Areas (HMAs): Black Rock Range East, Black Rock Range West, Calico Mountains, Granite Range, and Warm Springs Canyon.

The Calico Mountains Complex comprises a total of about 542,100 acres and is located northeast of Gerlach, in northwest Nevada within Humboldt and Washoe counties. A portion of the area is located within the BLM's Black Rock Desert High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (NCA) and associated wilderness.

Description of the Environment?
The area is very arid. Elevations within the Complex range from 3,920 feet along the Black Rock Desert to 9,056 feet at Granite Peak. The climate is characterized by warm dry days, cool nights and low yearly precipitation that ranges from 4 inches at lower elevations to 16 inches at higher elevations. Most precipitation occurs as winter snow. Vegetation in the Complex varies from salt desert shrub communities at lower elevations to big sagebrush/bunch grass communities at higher elevations. Although numerous small perennial streams and springs exist throughout the Complex, many areas are characterized by limited natural water flows, thus, water developments (e.g., wells, troughs and dirt reservoirs) are important sources of water for both livestock and wild horses in the area.

Will BLM remove all the horses that are gathered?
The BLM is gathering more horses than it is removing so it can apply fertility control and release the appropriate proportions of males to females to achieve a sex ratio that is 60 percent males to 40 percent females in the herds. Therefore, the goal is to gather approximately 2,700 horses, but only remove approximately 2,500 horses. The actual number of wild horses removed will depend on the overall success of the gather operations, but we have an overall post-gather target population of approximately 572 horses that would remain within the Complex.

The Proposed Action provides for the following:

• 2,432 (80%) to 2,736 (90%) excess wild horses of the total estimated population (3,040 head) would be gathered, up to 268 head (80 treated mares and 184 studs) would be released back onto the range, and 2,432 to 2,468 excess wild horses would be removed from the range to achieve the low range AML.

Does the BLM use fertility control?
Yes, the BLM has promoted and supported the development of an effective contraceptive agent for wild horses since 1978. The most promising agent is a Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) vaccine that was developed in the 1990s, but is not commercially available. The PZP vaccine is used by BLM in cooperation with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) under a research protocol.

How are fertility control and adjusting the sex ratio implemented?
Fertility control treatments and modification of sex ratios of released animals would slow population growth and could increase the time period before another gather was required. If the gather efficiency exceeds 80% (2,476 head) then the following management actions would be implemented to the degree possible while still achieving the low range AML:

- All mares selected for release, including those previously treated with fertility control, would be treated/retreated with a two-year Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP-22) or similar vaccine and released back to the range. Immuno-contraceptive research would be conducted in accordance with the approved standard operating and post-treatment monitoring procedures. Mares would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.
- Studs selected for release would be released to increase the post-gather sex ratio to approximately 60% studs in the remaining herds. Studs would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.

Animals would be removed using a selective removal strategy to the extent possible. Selective removal criteria include:

(1) First Priority: Age Class - Five Years and Younger
(2) Second Priority: Age Class - Six to Fifteen Years Old
(3) Third Priority: Age Class Sixteen Years and Older

Post-gather, every effort would be made to return released horses to the same general area from which they were gathered.

How does the BLM gather horses?
The BLM uses a Federal gather contractor to gather wild horses from HMAs where the BLM has determined that excess animals exist. The contractor uses a helicopter to locate and herd horses towards a set of corrals where the horses are gathered. The helicopter is assisted by a ground crew and the use of a Parada, a domesticated horse, to move the excess horses into the corrals. If needed, the ground crew may assist the helicopter by roping the horses from horseback.

Why does the BLM use helicopters to gather horses – isn't that inhumane?
The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, as amended, authorizes the BLM and the Forest Service to use helicopters to gather animals, as well as motorized vehicles to transport gathered animals. The use of helicopters and motorized vehicles has proven to be a safe, effective, and practical means for the gather and removal of excess wild horses and burros from the range. This is demonstrated by the gather of nearly 25,000 wild horses and burros during fiscal years (FY) 2004-2008 with a mortality rate of less than one half of one percent.

Though the horses experience a heightened stress level for the short period of time that the helicopter is herding the animals towards the gather corrals, animals calm down quite quickly afterwards. Helicopter gathers require a third to half the time of traditional water or horseback trapping methods.

Other methods of gathering horses on horseback or water trapping can be effective in small gathers and in confined spaces, but they are not nearly as efficient as helicopter gathers. Water trapping can be very effective when water resources are scarce but nearly impossible otherwise. Also, this method is very time consuming.

Using horseback riders to herd the horses into gather corrals is very difficult in large open areas of public lands. This practice is very hard on the domestic horses and the riders; both have a high likelihood of being hurt. This method is very inefficient and takes an enormous amount of time to complete.

For the Calico Mountains Complex, gathering on horseback or through use of water trapping would not be effective means because: 1) the size of the area is too large to use these methods; and 2) the presence of water sources on both private and public lands inside and outside the Complex's boundary would make it almost impossible to restrict wild horse access to water trap sites.

Does the public have input regarding the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles in managing wild horses and burros?

Yes, Section 9 of the 1971 Act, requires that a public hearing be held prior to the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles. Hearings are held annually. The purpose of the hearings is to hear public concerns so that BLM can review its Standard Operating Procedures to assure animals are treated humanely. The BLM Nevada State Office held a public hearing on May 20, 2009. BLM reviewed its Standard Operating Procedures in response to the views and issues raised at that public meeting and determined that no changes to the SOPs were warranted.

Why is this herd being gathered in the winter?

Winter gathers in this area are preferred as foals are older and wild horses are located at lower elevations, reducing the travel distance to the trap site. Oftentimes, wild horses are located at the highest elevations during the summer months, and therefore, would have to travel over steep terrain to the trap sites. Dense tree cover further increases the difficulty of gathering wild horses during summer months.

The terrain is also rocky, and past experience indicates that fewer injuries to hooves and legs occur during winter gathers in this area. Winter gathers typically result in less stress to wild horses as the cold and snow does not affect horses during the gather to the degree that heat and dust would during summer gathers.

Is this an emergency action?

It is not currently, but could become, due to limited forage and water resources. If this population management action is not completed in the near future, the likelihood of an emergency situation increases due to limited winter forage and reduced water availability caused by excess wild horses, drought conditions or severe weather.

How many horses would be removed?

The proposal is to remove approximately 2,500 excess wild horses from the Calico Mountains Complex, which includes the Black Rock Range East, Black Rock Range West, Calico Mountains, Granite Range, and

Warm Springs Canyon HMAs. A population of approximately 572 horses will remain on the range, which is within the appropriate management level established for this area.

What happens to the horses that don't go back to the range?
The excess wild horses removed from the range will be shipped to a short-term holding facility in Fallon, Nevada, to be prepared for the BLM wild horse adoption program or for long-term holding. They will be checked by a veterinarian and receive vaccinations and freeze marks. We are not sure when these particular horses would be available for adoption, but the short-term holding facility outside Reno, the Palomino Valley Center, is full to capacity with horses available for adoption right now.

Currently there are more than 30,000 wild horses and burros maintained at short and long-term holding facilities and pastures. In the case of long-term holding pastures, unadopted and unsold horses live out the rest of their lives in these grassy prairie-land areas of the Midwest, and are cared for by contractors. New contracts for long-term holding pastures will allow an additional 8,000 head to be cared for in long-term holding pastures, and these pastures will become available in the next couple of months to accommodate the horses gathered in the Calico Mountains Complex and from other gathers. Animals are held between 10 and 25 years depending on their age when they enter lifetime holding. In contrast, only a small percentage of wild horses roaming public rangelands live past the age of 15 because of the harsher living conditions.

Population Questions

What is the current population of the herd?
The current population of 3,040 wild horses for the Calico Mountains Complex is based on an aerial census completed in September 2009. The current population is about 5.5 times the low range of the AML (572 head) or about three times over the high range AML of 952 head which is the maximum level at which a thriving natural ecological balance can be maintained.

Why doesn't the BLM gather to the high range of AML?
The foal crop that will arrive in the spring will increase the herd sizes 20-27% on average, pushing the herd populations once again over AML within weeks of the gather. The rangelands will continue to worsen and the need to gather to AML will arise again.

How did the population go from 600 to 3,000 in 5 years?
The last gather in the Calico Complex occurred in the winter of 2004-2005 and at that time, the BLM believed they had achieved the low range of the AML, which is 572 wild horses. Data from a direct count aerial population survey in March 2008 suggests that BLM under-estimated the number of horses remaining in the Calico Complex following the 2005 gather. The wild horse count that occurred prior to the 2005 gather took place during poor weather conditions which may have led to an under-count of the actual wild horse population (and number of excess horses to be removed). This, combined with population growth over the past five years, resulted in horse population growing to the current population of over 3,000 wild horses. The census data collected for the Complex in March 2008 and September 2009 is considered to be highly reliable, based on use of more accurate techniques than were used in earlier counts.

Contractor Questions

How does the BLM select its gather contractors?
The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded in 2006 following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review was evaluation of the prospective contractor's knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle wild horses and burros in a safe, effective and humane manner. The BLM's contractors have demonstrated the knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle these animals safely, effectively and humanely.

Range/Grazing Questions

How does the BLM determine if the range has deteriorated – is there sound science involved?
Yes, the BLM conducts monitoring of public lands for vegetation condition, forage and water availability and wildlife habitat condition. Riparian assessments, utilization monitoring and trend data indicate excessive wild horse use is contributing to degradation of rangeland resources including damage to water sources, riparian areas (these are water sources such as stream and creek banks, seeps) and overutilization of forage at higher elevations. The Proposed Action is consistent with maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance between wild horse and burro populations, wildlife, livestock and vegetation, and to protect the range from the deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild horses and burros.

For decades, the BLM has hired rangeland management specialists, wildlife biologists, as well as wild horse and burro specialists, whose expertise is used to monitor and assess rangeland conditions on public lands.

What are the drought conditions like in this area?
The West has been in a drought for more than a decade. In the Great Basin high desert of Nevada, where the Complex is located, the average annual precipitation is often less than 11 inches. Drought conditions can occur as frequently as 6 out of every 10 years. Drought conditions have been especially serious in the Complex since the most recent gather in 2005. Long-term precipitation data indicate drought conditions experienced between 2006 to the present have resulted in the lowest recorded precipitation since 1985 in some areas and since 1990 in others.

Is there livestock grazing in this area?
Yes, there are four allotments in the Calico Mountains Complex. However, the permittees have voluntarily reduced their use based on drought, limited forage, wild horses in excess of AML and horse impacts to existing water projects.

Does wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?
A wide variety of wildlife species common to the Great Basin ecosystem can be found in the Complex. These include coyote, black-tail jackrabbit, desert cottontail, bobcat, and numerous raptors, reptiles, and other small mammals. Bighorn sheep habitat also occurs throughout the Complex. Bighorn sheep need abundant forage of continuous distribution. Mule deer and pronghorn are common big game species whose habitat in the Complex includes year-long as well as crucial winter habitat. These species also need abundant forage to thrive. As part of its multiple-use mission, the BLM is mandated to protect habitat to support these wildlife species.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure. Continuous grazing does not allow plants sufficient time to recover from grazing impacts. Such overgrazing results in reduced plant health, vigor, reproduction, and ultimately to a loss of native forage species from natural plant communities. Over time, this greatly diminishes habitat quality as abundance and long-term production of desired plant communities is compromised. If horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

Why don't you just make more land available to the horses?
The BLM would need approval from Congress to expand herd areas for wild horses. By law, wild horses can only be managed on areas of public lands where they were known to exist in 1971, at the time of the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Adoption Question

How can I adopt one of the horses?
The excess wild horses and burros removed from the range are offered for adoption to qualified people through the BLM's Adopt a Wild Horse or Burro Program. Potential adopters must have the proper facilities and financial means to care for an adopted animal, and we always hope that they have experience working with a wild horse or burro, which will help ensure the gentling process.

During the first year, the government retains title to the animal(s), and will conduct compliance checks throughout the year in an effort to ensure as much as possible that the animal is properly being cared for and has gone to a good home. At the end of the first year, if the adopter has complied with all the adoption stipulations and has properly cared for their mustang or burro for one year, he or she is eligible to receive title, or ownership, from the Federal government.

The BLM has placed nearly 225,000 wild horses and burros into private care since the adoption program began in 1971. To apply to adopt a wild horse or burro on-line, please go to the BLM's adoption website at:
http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/What_We_Do/wild_horse_and_burro0.html. If you are interested in adopting directly from one of the BLM's holding facilities, please visit the agency's facilities page. For more information about the BLM's Adopt-A-Horse or Burro program, please visit *http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro.html, or you may call 1-800-4Mustangs with any questions about the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.*